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UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT
OF AGRICULTURE

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★ SEP 10 1935 ★
U.S. Department of Agriculture

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT Friday, September 20, 1935

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Subject: "FRUIT COMPLEXIONS." Information from the Bureau of Plant Industry, United States Department of Agriculture. Statements taken in part from article in the Consumers' Guide, AAA.

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News about complexions is what I have for you today -- complexions that are natural, and those that look natural. Bright complexions are fashionable these days. And we women are willing to pay well for artificial color if we haven't the natural kind. According to the statistics, we spend millions each year for rouge and lipstick and eye shadow and other coloring.

I sometimes wonder if this gave the fruit producers the idea of touching up the complexions of their products. Certainly everyone who deals in fruit knows how much color affects sales. A good example of this is the grading of apples. The two top grades of apples are "Extra Fancy" and "Fancy." The main difference is color, although highly colored apples usually have a better flavor and contain more sugar than poorly colored ones. "Extra Fancy" apples have brighter complexions, so sell for a higher price.

Most of us are accustomed to relying on color as an indication of ripeness and flavor in fruit. The better the natural color, the higher the quality and the higher the price we are willing to pay. Many of us don't know that color of some fruits is no longer a very reliable gauge. Some kinds of citrus fruits are ripe and ready to eat before their color has changed. For example, one variety of orange is greenish when ripe and another is true orange color. Then again, a kind of fruit that is naturally bright may happen not to get its usual color, but may be ripe in every other way. When people buy by color, this means a loss of sales.

So, years ago, investigators discovered a way of speeding up nature's coloring job. This was by using ethylene gas, which destroys the green color in the fruit skin and thus brings out the yellow or red color which the green concealed. Actually, this is what happens when certain fruits like tomatoes mature or when leaves turn red and yellow in the fall. The green color disappears. Nature makes this color change slowly. Ethylene gas simply hastens the process. But the gas has no other ripening effect on the fruit. It doesn't improve the quality and it doesn't make it sweeter, as nature does.

This gassing has to be done carefully to be successful. Too much gas may burn the fruit and make some of those brown spots you see now and then on oranges and grapefruit. If the air is not damp enough, the fruit shrivels. If it is too damp, decay may set in. If the air is too warm, the flavor of the fruit changes -- the high temperature actually cooks the fruit a little.

On fruit that is mature and ready to eat, this de-greening process, well done, is no more harmful than the blanching of celery. The Department of Agriculture recognizes the treatment as a legitimate trade practice for mature fruit. It simply gives good fruit color-appeal. But the Department forbids the treatment of immature fruit. The Food and Drug Administration considers it a violation of the Federal Food and Drug Act to make immature fruit look ripe because it conceals inferiority. If such fruit is shipped into interstate commerce, it is liable to seizure and the packers to prosecution.

Ethylene gas has been tried out with melons, pears, bananas, tomatoes, but is used most with citrus fruits. Most of us want our oranges orange color and our lemons lemon yellow. Unless we live where these fruits grow, we don't know that many varieties are ripe when still green in color. In tropical countries people buy bright green oranges without hesitation. Some even prefer them as fresher, or because they happen to like that certain variety. Many packers go to a good deal of effort to make the condition and the color of the fruit coincide. Ethylene gas should not be applied to any of the starchy foods.

The Valencia orange is a good example of justified color treatment. While the Valencia is still quite immature in the late fall the trees become almost dormant. The supply of green color is cut off. Consequently the young fruit turns a bright yellow. As spring advances and the tree awakes, new green leaves form and the maturing orange again turns green. If left on the tree, it will never lose this green color, even when it becomes perfectly ripe. But if the good housewives in most parts of the country saw green oranges at the market, they just wouldn't buy them. So Valencias are de-greened to make them sell.

Lemons are another good example. Lemons are nearly always picked when very green. If left to ripen on the tree, they would be too large and coarse for the market, and they would not be as acid. Since we want our lemons yellow, producers treat them to give that desired shade.

Some varieties of oranges come from the ethylene rooms looking quite pale after their de-greening. To tone up the complexions of such fruit, and of others which have not been treated with gas but happen to be off color, some packers pass them through a vat of orange-colored dye. Dyes commonly used are oil-soluble aniline dyes. Food and Drug officials say they "have not been able to establish any measurable adverse effect on the health of consumers, even when the dyed peel is eaten in marmalade."

Federal inspectors cannot forbid the sale of dyed oranged provided this added color is declared on each orange; provided that it will have no injurious effect on those of us who eat these oranges; and provided the color doesn't conceal damage or inferiority. The Food and Drug Administration says that this process may be deceptive to the consumer, but is not specifically covered by the Federal Act. However, several States have stronger laws on this matter. Some make artificial coloring a violation, if the color makes the article appear better than it really is. Some States have served notice on the industry that they will take action against all dyed oranges on this basis.

Well, here are a few facts about beauty treatments for fruit complexions and the topic is worth thought by every housewife who does the family marketing.

Complexions have always been a feminine problem. Seems to me that holds for fruit complexions as well as human complexions. The housewife who does the family marketing is the one to decide whether she wants to pay more for color treatments such as ethylene gas baths or dyeing. And she is the one to be concerned that such coloring processes should be used on good, ripe fruit, not to conceal unripe or inferior products.

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